Billboards!

Last week I saw two men sticking a giant poster of the Geico Insurance Company on a billboard. I couldn’t quite see where they were standing — it was their movement that caught my eye. They looked like two black spiders floating against the white background of the advertisement. The previous advertisement depicted two lawyers from the Bonilla Law Firm whose smiles were smiled chest-deep with professional friendless. (Ignore their fees and pay attention to their smiles.) The billboard was like a stamp on a blue envelope of sky. The new celebrity was a gecko. He was standing with a kind of green dignity: a successful representative of the lizard community, staring down at all the car drivers, a moral reminder. “Ten minutes can save you money....” Pay attention to the money and just ignore the reptile.

Billboard stickers come in bulletin-size and poster-size. Bulletins will dangle by the highway on prominent roads and you will never miss them. Posters will be on arterial roads. This one was the sort of picture one views in a magazine blown up a hundred times. We all love to see the large faces of our movie stars on the big screen. How the smiles and several-feet-long eyebrows on those giant heads move and talk! This animated gecko had a human-like expression. You wonder what a reptilian brain could
evolve into if given a chance! You have an obligation to your car to buy insurance.

We have our eyebrows and eyes stuck to our faces highlighting our personalities. I am amazed by the variation in the different ways these stick to faces like stamps so as to represent each and every person. “We are all the same,” says democracy, but few become poster people. Others like us — we do the best we can with our looks while helplessly watching the hair designer trim our hair too thin with secret ambition. “Ambition,” as Oscar Wilde had defined it, “is the last refuge of failure.” Once again our hair style fails our faces. We pay the hair stylist and ignore our faces while we wait for our hair to grow.

The sky, like some kind of a blue wrapping paper, encloses the earth. Pictures of earth from space amaze us. We see this little blue and white blob enveloped by black space. Then we go back to minding what we can manage to mind down here within this package. Where are we getting delivered? We may be shooting out of Hubble telescope from our own air-bubble-wrapped world, but how far will it probe for us? Moon landings no longer excite us. We want to see something big. We can now watch how our war science explodes tiny atoms that blow up big cities right in our living rooms as we shake our heads in horror. Bombs drop like rituals in different cities of the Middle East to be photographed so that we can be appropriately appalled.

When Carl Sagan saw the picture of the “blue dot-like world” taken by Voyager 1 — it was six billion kilometers away from earth — he told Time Magazine, “There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.” I have seen messages on billboards — “Let’s make earth a better place!”
Who will initiate this folly?

2,500 years ago, Aesop knew about such folly. One fable talks about a mouse-meeting where the mice decide how to caution each other about a cat. They decide to tie a bell around the cat’s neck so that whenever the cat comes close, the bell will ring to warn them. However, none of the mice actually bothered to tie the bell around a living breathing cat. Who will initiate any of those slogans they put on the billboard?

It is so easy to warn each other about the state of the world. Many people seem to know exactly what to do. A billboard I once encountered advised all the gas-guzzling, smoke-oozing trucks and cars to take good care of the earth! Every truck had an attitude of “dare me” at the warning.

Cities get makeovers. It is more than your mere haircut. When Rio was chosen as the Olympic city, the authorities directed an ambitious makeover of the city. An Olympic Villages was constructed, new roads were built, politics were hushed, and no political demonstrations were allowed... and still the Australian team refused to move into the Olympic Village! It wasn’t clean enough for their standards.

Games and competitions masked political protests. Striving for gold kept the spirits high. However small an individual moment may be, the winning moment is big. Many stories about the winner’s medal were presented. Years of sweat compressed in a medal!

“Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at the sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” So says folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Dust Tracks on
a Road. Big stories to inspire a piece of shining gold. Big messages to write on the billboard.

That blue dot that Carl Sagan saw does indeed hide human efforts and conceits if looked at from space. Big news coverage of the Rio Olympics, and no one was talking about the South African blade runner scandal from the previous London Olympics. Everyone moves on — one medal moment to other medal moments. The earth moves on, covering 583 million miles in one year! Memories and moments are left behind; we move on, from billboard to billboard, message to message. Some of us memorize them — how two lawyers were erased by a green gecko. Who bought the lawyers out?

The things that show up; it’s a mere second before the next thing shows up. What are we forcing our eyes to see?

Once, six or seven or maybe seven and half years ago, I happened to see a heavy red backpack on someone’s narrow shoulders. I don’t know who the bearer of those shoulders was, but that heavy red backpack with shoulders was included in a list of things I saw. I kept the visual image inside of my head where much important information could have been stored. We can pluck visual pictures, scavenging the streets of our encounters and load up our heads. For a while I carried the image of the narrow shoulders carrying a red backpack and all its heaviness like a portable billboard, squeezing it in my brain. And after that it all began to happen.

My curious mind began to wonder what was inside the backpack some five days later. Nothing I could fill it with would satisfy me. I began to open the backpacks of people at school just to get an idea of what might be in there. It had been so prominently placed in my head. Of course, one can always get away with things if one is chronically
Autistic, including opening other people’s backpacks. But you mustn’t worry about your backpack. I abandoned the backpack habit long ago while the earth was six or seven or maybe seven and a half years younger, seven times 583 million miles ago, working its way in a closed elliptical circuit, a solitary runner with no finishing line. All that practice of racing through eons and no medal moment for the earth.

New questions arise — Do cats catch mice any more or do modern and updated cats prefer pre-cooked high-protein cat food from Rachel Ray?

Images pile up. Some images become the highlights of life like that of a broken mirror. Someone had placed a large mirror on Poinsettia Avenue in Los Angeles on the curb to be disposed of. It was as large as a door! It had slit the world along its diagonal into two. A probable world — broken trees, broken people, and broken thoughts that could exist if it existed behind it — began to pile up inside my head. Mind, I find, is always better than Stomach. After a meal the stomach is filled. But when the mind eats up an image the outgrowth and branches can touch infinity. That broken mirror dissecting the world grew big as a billboard in my head. Then it grew further to churn out galaxies of visual possibilities. Will someone take it to space and look at a divided world?

The size of the Milky Way is measured in time: 120,000 light years in diameter. And there are some 400 billion stars that have churned out of the center, to turn it around 630 kilometers per second. We on earth take up a tiny space in it. Who would have the eyes to see the enormous image in space? The galaxy moves between bigger billboards along that terrific highway of a terrific town called universe that we will never understand in our lifetime.
When that scientist chopped his living specimen of a sponge into really tiny pieces in his dish, and left the room to return after a while, he found that those tiny pieces had rearranged themselves into hundreds of miniature beings identical to the parent sponge.

We carry the Milky Way-sized data in our sponge-like minds; piece by piece, image by image, it begins to collect. Using the data, we are able to imagine an alien ship, dream the impossible. Because of the data in our heads, we can grow the face of God. We know how important a face is. Once I had tried to search for the face of a snail in a picture.

One day a snail can touch the toe of a man showing him the miniature image of the Milky Way in his logarithmic spiral shell. But man will ignore the snail. He will continue to wait for the Hubble images to memorize him.